



MURRAY STATE
UNIVERSITY

Murray State's Digital Commons

Murray State Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

2018

At Your Own Risk

JACOB DONALDSON

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DONALDSON, JACOB, "At Your Own Risk" (2018). *Murray State Theses and Dissertations*. 112.
<https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/etd/112>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Murray State's Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Murray State Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Murray State's Digital Commons. For more information, please contact msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu.

At Your Own Risk

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy
Murray State University
Murray, KY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by Jacob Donaldson
May 2018

For my family.

Wars, as easy to stop as glaciers
-Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	v
Map of Cyrus.....	xvi
Grace and William.....	1
Increasingly Terrible Decisions of Walter Mooneyham.....	4
The Day William Died.....	25
Between the Pines.....	28
Cyrus.....	46
Whiskey, Women, and Lucky Charms.....	49
Works Cited.....	64

INTRODUCTION

The task, write an introduction to my thesis. “Just write about why you write,” everyone said in my frantic panic of what the hell do I do now. I have never considered myself a “good” writer. It has taken much better people than myself to keep me going on this path. This is not to say I do not want to write; on the contrary, I love my time writing. The agony of the blank page. The taunts of incomplete stories and ideas are why I sit with my drink in hand. I love stories. Getting to hear them or tell them is what excites me. Wright Morris says in his book *About Fiction* that each writer has some different reason why they write.

Some writers reply that they simply can't help it, like an itch they must scratch. Others describe it as an addiction acquired in such a manner they can't shake it. Others hardly know why they do it, but appreciate that they are paid for it. It beats working...some who write out of talent, and the pleasure talent brings to the writing of fiction. To have a talent for fiction is to risk a priesthood where many are called but few are chosen. War and the arts never lack for converts. Talent is also an ear for a distant drummer. It has its romantic side...In the writer at work the instinct and the ego share a precarious peace. He is at war in his fiction, where a lasting peace is actually possible. (Morris 9-11)

I asked myself which category do I fall in? I write because it helps me “center” myself. Being former Army, much of my civilian life has felt out of control, more specifically out of my control. Writing alleviates that feeling. Thinking of ways to inflict my control on my characters and stories drives my writing. Even after a story is complete, I never let it

finish because I can still change a scene or injure a character that, before then, had made it through the story unscathed.

I think the more interesting question than why do I write, is what did I learn from my experiences in the Murray State University Low-Residency MFA program. Coming from my undergraduate from the University of Mississippi, I studied poetry and had found minor success in writing poetry. I have won a few awards in poetry and even the Southern Literary Festival in 2012 from the University of Mississippi. Poetry seemed simple to me, the idea of telling a story in as few words as possible is how I viewed the art of writing poetry. I soon found out that my goals as a poet were just to have alone time to write and that was not enough for me. I wanted to try something I considered hard. So back to the more interesting question, the answer would be everything. I had taken a few fiction writing courses as an undergraduate, so I sat down and submitted to the program. I learned how to make my own attempt at writing. Without this program to push me, I would have fallen back into my simplistic view of poetry. Now, I do not read without seeing what the author is attempting. I cannot look at a story without thinking of the extraordinary work and effort that went into crafting it. I have learned that revisions are what make a great story and how to craft fiction with techniques such as structure or creating depth of character by describing how their environment looks.

My time at Murray State has taught me to look for subtleties in writing. Dale Ray Phillips taught me the importance of my first sentence, how the connection to it assimilates throughout the entire work and that the first page is how the reader will tell what to expect. In my story “Whiskey, Women, and Lucky Charms,” I teach my reader on the first page how to read the story. I try to have the reader realize on the first page,

that the protagonist is not able to simply live in the present, when the past is just as real to him and hopefully the reader shares in his mirages. The structure of that story never felt like I was leading the reader along, or withholding some information they needed to comprehend what was going on. The first sentence gives a backstory that the story later examines.

Wright Morris says that “the great writers of fiction are those who know what it is, and consider their faculty for it a calling. Life is an excuse for the production of literature” (19). This program has taught me to take my life and use it to produce literature. The story of Walter and the bobcat is a true story, one where Walter is really my father. Before I would try and create the world of my story from scratch and not use anything of my life. It felt void. My characters were undeveloped, my plots tedious and over indulgent. It was my acceptance into the program that allowed me to see my life and events in it make the base for good storytelling.

Ernest Hemingway said in a letter to Maxwell Perkins in 1928 “whatever success I have had has been through writing what I know about” (Hemingway 21). This advice was given to me through this program. Fiction does not have to be complete fiction; it can be based on life – you can take life and try to mimic it in fiction – in fact it is what each author strives for. Each fiction writer wants his readers to be swept away from the reality of their lives and focus on the world the writer has created; they want them to focus and care for the characters in that world, leaving their reality behind if only for a brief moment. It is the mimicry of life that captures readers' attention. A writer cannot write about what they do not know about. This collection has each character risking themselves in some way or another. It tries to mimic life. Morris says that fiction

“provides that link in the chain of awareness that relates man to the urmensch of his subconscious. Fiction was there in the dark of the cave, at the beginning, and it will be there in the ruins at the end, oral, chiseled, or computed” (7).

This program has taught me to take my life, in bits and pieces, and write about what I know. It has taught me to use life as a reason for literature. Writing has become an itch I cannot scratch, and this program has given me the talent to pursue the itch.

STRUCTURE

Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse Five* resonated with me. Dale Ray suggested I read it on my first semester, and I have read it nearly every year since. The structure and pacing of the work intrigue me. I wanted, in some poor attempt, to mimic it in my “Whiskey, Women, and Lucky Charms.” Branch’s past becomes something that takes over his day-to-day life, and by the end, the reader and the protagonist both realize he has to do something. The structure of the story has encapsulated multiple events, by peeling them back as Branch relives them.

Where Vonnegut’s character was slipping through time and space seamlessly, Branch stumbles and fuddles through his everyday life. It is the structure that creates the tension in Vonnegut’s piece,

Being a student of writing, I find that it is the technique in the structure the author chooses that makes the difference for me between a story and a story I’ll re-read over again learning from each reading, like when an author uses repetition or layers the story in a way that a cold hand can imply a cold heart. The repetition of “so it goes” after each death in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse* brings a coldness to death. The reader begins to see death as a war-beaten soldier does, cold. By Vonnegut having the saying originate from

the Tralfamadorians (aliens), it creates a symbolism between a man at home and one at war. Before the program, I would have missed this, not to mention how to build upon it myself. I would have read the story and moved on. When repetition works with the structure of the story and is well done, it does not become intrusive for the reader; instead, it enhances the reading making it seem natural to the story.

David Madden says in his craft book *Revising Fiction* about structure:

A story may be broken up into three major phases...the beginning, the middle, and the end. For instance, a conflict is introduced in the beginning, goes through a series of complications in the middle, and reaches a climax of denouement in the end. Previous to the climax, several minor climaxes may occur...Structure is often mistaken for plot. Plot, as I have suggested, is the simultaneous development of many elements, while structure is more strictly speaking the sequential organization of narrative events; it is the skeleton of form. (118-119)

In Vonnegut's story, Billy, his protagonist, was at the Dresden bombings as a prisoner of war during World War II. This event trickles in at the start of the story, but isn't fully realized until the climax and ending.

Another great novel that has an equally great structure is *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O'Brien. O'Brien uses the things the soldiers carry as reflection of who they are as characters. He structures the story starting in the Vietnam War with the things they carry. As the reader continues, the story changes to before the main character was drafted. It moves to a time when he remembers killing his first man and a time when his daughter asks him if he ever killed anyone. The overall structure of the story is what one

man went through in war, and how what they carried described them as characters.. The structure creates the story; had the story only been of his time in Vietnam and not shown the before and after, all the while the war is still the main story, then the reader would not have been able to connect so deeply with the narrator. His humanity would not have been felt as greatly if we readers did not get a story of him trying to escape the draft.

The structure of both these great stories inspired mine. At first draft it was incomprehensible, but after working with my mentors I was able to take my story, a draft that was once the original story I submitted for acceptance into the program, into a story that, hopefully, has depth in structure and character development. Each of the stories in this collection are the accumulation of all that I have been taught through my mentors.

CLIMAX

In Michael Kardos' craft book *The Art & Craft of Fiction: A Writer's Guide*, he writes about climax in fiction. He writes: "Your story's conflict, whatever it is, will need to come to a climatic moment. And that moment should most likely be given its due space" (Kardos 103). My fictitious town, Cyrus, has had many climactic moments: the one that led to the creation of the town, down to the minute moments of my characters in each story. Kardos continues on and provides a checklist for stories, focused on climax. He says writers should ask themselves "What is your story's climax? Does it have one?" (Kardos 103). In my story, "Between the Pines," the conflict is in the first paragraph. It builds and ends shortly after the brothers get back to their farm. I wanted to build the climax with escalating events to show what the characters were going through and how their reactions shaped who they are. The ending, it can be argued, could be the climax, but I see the climax as when the brothers see each other for the first time since the

opening and events thereafter as continuing towards an inevitable end

Sometimes it is hard for me, as a writer, to pinpoint my climax. I may think, at times, it is a few scenes. “Between the Pines” is a great example of this. The first draft of this story had an ending that showed more of the aftereffects of the brothers’ turmoil, but after revisions, I decided to end with one of the more climatic moments of the story. In George Saunders’ collection of short stories titled *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*, one story “The 400-Pound CEO,” has a climax that comes at the end as the narrator is cuffed, and readers get more internal dialogue, “They cuff me and lead me away...Then he gives me fifty, as opposed to life without parole. So now I know misery” (63). I personally do not write many stories in first person, but I used this idea of ending climatically on my story, and instead of having internal dialogue of my protagonist, I instead tried to show the reader what he was thinking, and hopefully at that point in the story the reader has connected well enough with the character that they understand him and what he would be thinking.

Another story in Saunders’ collection is “The Wavemaker Falters.” Here his climax comes at the end as well, and he leaves his ending eerie and foreshadowing of what comes after.

A storm rolls in over the hills and a brochure describing a portrait offer gets plastered across my chest. Lighting strikes the slaughterhouse flagpole and the antelope scatter like minnows as the rain begins to fall, and finally, having lost what was to be lost, my torn and black heart rebels, saying enough already, enough, this is as low as I go. (Saunders 44)

I asked myself if Saunders' ending fits with Kardos' question of climax, and I think Saunders again sets his climax at his ending. Saunders uses his ending to look toward the future of his story. In “Between the Pines” I try to do the same, giving the brothers hope, but never saying whether it comes in time to save them. Kardos says doing this can deepen the meaning of the story (99). He uses the Freytag Pyramid as an example but says that modern writers modify the pyramid: “it’s common for the contemporary short story to start right at the beginning of the rising action, at the moment when conflict begins” (Kardos 97).

I used this method for my story. I built upon the examples by Saunders and other authors such as Denis Johnson. His collection *Jesus' Son* is one of my favorites to read and inspired me to be able to show my characters by their choices and surroundings rather than narrative text. Each of my stories in this collection starts with conflict and the story near climax, so that the escalating events would be the rising action. Kardos says sometimes a story ends and “reveals neither...immediate nor long-term future. Rather, it ends at the place in the falling action where we get only a glimmer of the future” (99). By learning from my mentors and craft books, I tried to follow this example of climax for my ending in “Whiskey, Women, and Lucky Charms.”

REVISION

Ernest Hemingway famously said he rewrote the ending to *A Farewell to Arms*, forty-seven times. He once stated in an interview it was thirty-nine times, but after scholars examined his collection, which has been housed in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston since 1979, they have found forty-seven alternative revisions.

In my first draft of “Whiskey, Women, and Lucky Charms” the flashbacks were just that, flashbacks. They weren't happening in the present for the protagonist; he was looking back at them, just another distant memory. It was not until I revised the work and made the memories present in his daily life, that the reader is able to grasp at what the character is going through and in doing so my hopes is for sympathy for the character, for the reader to see him as a flawed man, but one with a harrowing decision that has to be made. Before revision, Branch flew to Germany and his flashbacks got longer until the reader was mostly reading a story that had already happened to him and not living a story with him.

In 1925 in a letter to his father, Dr. C. E. Hemingway, Ernest Hemingway wrote:

You see I'm trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing. You can't do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful. (33)

I think that is what we all attempt as writers. We try to give the feeling of our characters' life across to the reader. With revision, writers have the ability to change whether a flashback stays in the past, as the first draft called for, or if it haunts and pursues the character daily in life, something like a creature of sorts that can hide around corners to wait.

In this collection, these stories have gone through drastic changes. From point-of-view, time periods, and even fates of characters. Kardos gives “Twelve Strategies for Revision”:

Revision after all, isn't about correcting typos or shuffling a few words around. It's about seeing your story anew (think “re-vision”), being willing to make everything messy again and that may take the story in an entirely new direction... Experienced writers...have learned how often the best stuff happens in revision, and so it pays to be fearless. (166)

I slowly revise my work during my first draft, take time off from the story and then revise it. I try and look at it entirely differently and judge each word chosen and why. This program has taught me that a word has to earn its place in a short story. It cannot be filled with meaninglessness, but each must guide the reader. A short story a mentor had me read, I cannot recall the name of it, starts with the protagonist driving a road she usually does not take, but this time it has a red trail drawn on a map that she is following. The author builds on those images, using the protagonist's job as a teacher and the fact that she has not driven this way before as foreshadowing. I wonder how many colors the drawn trail was, and if during revision, the author decided to make the color red so it would be a hint to the reader, the protagonist's profession.

Revision in my stories helped me hone and specify the story I was trying to tell. Flashbacks, in some, were present after revision, some would change from pages to sentences after seeing the worth of the words used. This self-awareness in writing was absent in me when starting the program. By having mentors guide me and give me authors like Saunders, Kardos, Johnson, and many more as examples, I was able to revise and re-see my work.

Eudora Welty's book *On Writing* has been a craft book I have used multiple times in this residency. She says:

Writers are often asked to give their own analysis of some story they have published. I never saw, as a reader or writer, that a finished story stood in need of any more from the author: for better or worse, there the story is. There is also the question of whether or not the author could provide the sort of analysis asked for. Story writing and critical analysis are indeed separate gifts, like spelling and playing the flute, and the same writer proficient in both has been doubly endowed. But even he can't rise and do both at the same time. (Welty 29)

In my attempt to analyze my own writing I thought back to her words. Though these stories are not published, my hope is that each story stands alone. Like John Gardner said in his craft book *The Art of Fiction*, "A scene will not be vivid if the writer gives too few details to stir and guide the reader's imagination; neither will it be vivid if the language...is abstract instead of concrete" (98). This collection has gone through revision at the attempt to be vivid and not abstract. The structure of some of the stories has the climax at the end, some at the beginning. My hope is that this collection is a vivid representation of what has been taught to me through this residency with the help of my mentors.



Grace and William

Rosie held the infant, lifeless in her arms as the flames danced towards the horsemen who galloped away. Her light brown skin was covered in ash from the burning long leaf pine trees and oaks that crackled around. This is her story. How a shack became a town, and how a former slave ruled north Mississippi.

Rosie was purchased by William Gardner in a small town near the gulf coast of Mississippi. She was six. William was a new slave owner and bought her along with her mother, a stunning woman who stood five foot three inches and whose voice soothed wild boar. She spoke with a smooth drawl that seemed to linger in the air like the sweet smell of honeysuckles. Her hair was long and black, like silk in the sun. Though Rosie only knew her as “Mom,” William called her Grace. Grace did not simply walk into a room, her feet never scratched or pounded the hard wood floor of the house stationed in the middle of town; she owned each room she walked into, even as a slave. William, upon seeing her coming towards a room he was sitting in, would get out of any chair he was seated, straighten his vest and shirt and say, “My Grace, did you sleep well?” or he would ask her, “My Grace, is there anything I can get for you?” Rosie knew William loved Grace before she ever heard the first squeaks of bedframe late in the night rhythmically tapping against the wall.

William hired men to paint the house white, and keep the yard clean as Grace liked it, but the two of them could never go anywhere together. Their love was hidden

behind the paint and lawn, a secret whispered and moaned in the bedroom. By age eight, Rosie could read and write, all taught to her by William. He taught them both.

The women of the town hated Grace; they hated her more than their own slaves. More than the slaves that slept with their husbands and raised their children. At night, they would whisper in their husbands' ears about how she walked or how only Rosie and herself live in the big house with William, surrounded by the town. On one walk she and Rosie took, Grace stepped in front of a white man riding a black horse, held her hand out and made him wait as the two of them crossed. The women watching yelled and cursed at her; the man simply rode on.

William made his money from cotton. He had a small farm in north Mississippi where his cotton grew. His other slaves were housed there, each with their family and separate house. If there ever was to be considered a good slave owner, William was one. He never beat his slaves, and apart from when he was a boy, he had never forced himself on one. A mistake he never asked forgiveness for, knew he did not deserve it.

"Beating a man," William said, "Only teaches him to hate, but if you take a beaten man and help him to his feet, his loyalties will be yours forever." He bends over and pats Rosie on the head. He had no children of his own, except for Rosie who he called daughter in the quiet seclusion of their home.

"Why do people hate me?" Rosie asked and took William's hand in her own. William looked down and sighed.

"There are some things in life we cannot control Rose," William let her hand go and rolled a cigarette. "And the thoughts of ignorant people are one of those things." Grace called from the kitchen.

Grace always made dinner from scratch. She stirred and chopped onions with potatoes and green beans. All day long the smell of pies wafted through the doors and windows of the house, making its way to townspeople who passed by.

“I've got to go check on the farm up north,” William kissed Grace's neck and took his seat. “It shouldn't take me more than a week or two.”

“Everything okay?” Grace asked as she sat the plate in front of him.

“Ronnie, says one of our families has a sick kid, so I gotta get the doctor up there to see him.”

In a two years, Civil War will plague them. William will fight for the North with his male slaves, while Rosie, Grace, the slaves' wives, and one crippled man will stay in the South, on the cotton farm.

Increasingly Terrible Decisions of Walter Mooneyham

Walter Mooneyham digs through his closet and throws his flannel hunting shirts and heavy overalls, the same ones he uses to fix the Gardner's car, onto his bed. He's been their groundskeeper for fourteen years now, since Raymond, his son, was born. Walter reaches behind the closet door, moves his tackle box and shotgun to grab his fishing net. He backs out of the closet and swings the net in the air.

"It'll hold," he smiles, grasping the aluminum pole. He puts it on the bed and picks up the clothes from the floor. Walter steadies himself with the wall, lifting one leg at a time for the overalls.

"Ray," he says folding one of the flannel shirts around his forearm. Ray's steps echo on the floor of the single-wide trailer. The Gardners bought Walt the trailer when Ray was born so he would always be on the property if they needed him. When Ray was five, Mr. Gardner dug fifteen feet deep behind the trailer and had a crew install a storm shelter. Originally there was supposed to be a tunnel leading from the shelter to the main house, but Mr. Gardner started using the shelter as an apartment of sorts where he brings the secretive and quiet men he meets nightly in his favorite bar in Cyrus, The Bear Cave.

Ray fills the door frame to Walter's room, nearly two hundred and fifty pounds and six feet tall, he fills most rooms of the faded yellow trailer.

"What's going on?" Ray says. "I was watching *Forensic Files*."

"There's a bobcat in my bathroom. Hold this," He nods at the folded flannel shirt.

"Left the window open."

“He wouldn't have come through the window unless he smelt something.”

“Come on Ray. You gonna lecture me on his scientific name or that he comes from Africa too?”

Walt rolls his eyes and strains his neck, “I might have left a plate of sausage I was eating in there.”

“Again?”

“Listen,” Walt says motioning his hands to say slow down. “By the time it was ready,” he laughs, “so was I. And when nature calls,” he slaps Ray's shoulder still holding the flannel shirt to his forearm. “Now grab this.” Ray presses firmly on the shirt as Walter secures it with duct tape. He grabs another shirt and does the same thing to the other arm. Pictures of Ray hang with inches of dust. The walls are dingy beige and have plastic wood trim. Brown water marks stain the ceiling from a leak Walter still can't find.

“So what's the plan? Trap it in the fishing net and carry it back outside like a kitten?” Ray shakes his head. “You know it can jump as far as ten feet, right? As well as grow to over twenty pounds. I saw it once on *Wilderness Detectives*. How big was it?”

Walter flexes his arms, “maximum flexibility,” he says, popping the white elastic strap of the plastic safety goggles he uses to weed-eat around the trailer and the Gardner's mansion, ponds, fences, and swimming pool with the waterfall where Mrs. Gardner likes to sun bathe topless.

Over the years, Walter has watched her from the hedge bushes and kneeling around the magnolia trees. She's caught him more than a few times but only smiles, winks and turns her back.

“I don't know,” Walter shrugs. “Remember Coach, that dog the Gardners had? It's

about that size.”

“Coach was a forty pound English bulldog.” Ray laughs and scratches his shaggy brown hair. “You might want to call Animal Control, or practically anyone other than you.” He laughs harder, “I’m just going to sit here and wait, okay?” Ray sits on the edge of Walter’s bed, the springs creak. Ray’s white t-shirt is stained and advertises a Girl Scout graduation class of 1983. A thirty-year old shirt Walt had found at the thrift store.

“You just keep quiet,” Walter says. “I got this.” He turns his Ole Miss baseball cap backwards, cracks his knuckles, and rolls both his shoulders. He slaps his face and rubs his beard, now gray. He looks at Ray and thinks if he had his hair, he would have Mrs. Gardner. Walter breathes in and out fast three times, grabs the fishing net on the flimsy aluminum pole, and closes the bathroom door behind him.

Instantly the room is filled with “Fuck” and “You little mother fucker.” At the same time, hisses and thuds echo in the room as the bathroom door bangs against the frame. The bobcat’s dingy yellow and brown fur is spotted black like a leopard. The tail is short and stubby. It hisses and curls in the bathtub, before leaping at Walt.

“Get the—” Walter pries the bobcat off his chest. “Come here.” He says spreading his legs and squaring off with the bobcat, now cornered in the beige plastic bathtub. Walter sways the fishing net at it, as it ducks under and lunges at his face ripping off the safety goggles. It digs into his nostril and rips the left one, trying to climb over Walter’s face and ear shredding it as well. “Son of a bitch,” Walter throws the bobcat against the far wall and fumbles opening and closing the bathroom door.

He presses his back against the door still cussing. Ray is laughing with tears in his eyes, he grips his stomach, rolling on the floral bedspread.

“He got me good that little shit.” Walter tosses the fishing net at Ray, it lands at his feet making him sit up to look at Walter.

“Looks like it. You're missing a piece of your upper left ear, and your left nostril is split from the bridge. Not to mention the maybe twenty or so scratches, but good news looks like your flannel worked.” Ray, still laughing, picks up the fishing net now shredded and bent near the middle.

Walter opens the closet, kicking the tackle box and grabbing his double-barrel side-by-side shotgun. He flings it open pressing one yellow cartridge in each barrel. It clicks as the barrels lock ready to fire. He eases the bathroom door open, turning the shotgun sideways to wedge the barrel in while holding his foot against the bottom of the door. He ducks his head in front of the crack and then back behind it, but can't see the bobcat. Walter quickly opens the door screaming, firing both barrels at once blasting a three-foot hole chest level in his shower wall. The tile falls cracking in the bathtub. Walter scans the room, but doesn't see the bobcat.

He closes the door, reaching in his pocket for more shells and spitting the blood out of his mouth that's pouring from his nose. He locks the shotgun upright and presses it firmly against his right shoulder. The bobcat jumps on his back, from behind the door, ripping Walter's flesh as it climbs. Walter twirls around busting his shin against the toilet bowl, but flings the bobcat off and quickly takes another shot with both barrels. He misses, exploding the back of his bathtub. The bobcat hisses and jumps out of the chest high hole, Walter leans out cussing.

Ray says, “Did you get him?” Walter closes the door and puts the shotgun back in the closet.

“You're gonna be late for school.”

“It's Saturday,” Ray looks in the bathroom. “Aren't you suppose to help Mr. Gardner with something today? Doesn't look like you got him.”

Walter looks at his watch, “Shit.” He says peeling the duct tape off the flannel shirt and stepping out of the overalls. Ray gets a rag wet and hands it to him. Walter wipes the blood from his face and tears the duct tape into two strips to hold his nostril together. He grabs a pair of cut off blue jean shorts and an old black t-shirt as he walks out the front door. The planks on the front porch are rotting.

“Treated wood my ass,” his boots tap on the wood steps. “I knew that kid at the co-op didn't know what the hell he was talking about.” His dingy gray Ford F100 whines and shoots a fog of black smoke and sludge when he cranks it. He passes his rusty garbage pail, full of trash, most of it scattered by raccoons. The Gardner's mansion is only about a mile away from his trailer. It's on the other side of the ten-acre lake and through the pecan grove. The pecan workers are out using the metal machines to grab the trunks and shake off the pecans. They collect them in a net wrapped around the trunk that funnels into a five-gallon red bucket.

Mr. Gardner is rocking back and forth on the white porch that encircles the entire mansion when Walter's truck grinds to a stop. Mr. Gardner gets up, flicking a long cigarette over the rails into the beds of roses, daisies, and chicories Mrs. Gardner always makes Walter spend hours cleaning and fertilizing.

“Walt,” Mr. Gardner says. “I was starting to think you forgot about little old me.” He puts his hands on his waist and steps off the porch.

“I didn't forget, Mr. Gardner. I just don't know what exactly we're doing. You said

you needed my help moving furniture in the shelter but you know I can't do much lifting since I fell out of that tree blind." Walter reaches his hand forward to shake Mr.

Gardner's, but Mr. Gardner steps in closer and hugs him.

"How many times do I have to ask you to call me Bill?" Mr. Gardner squeezes Walter and backs away, still holding him. "Anyway, it isn't really moving furniture I need your help with," Bill leans in and whispers, "that was just so Elaine wouldn't ask any questions. Let's go for a drive in your truck." Bill lets go of Walter cringing at Walter's wounds. "What happened?"

"This ain't nothing, just some little bobcat jumped on me by surprise." Walter gets in his truck. "Where to?"

"We can talk in the shelter."

"Okay," Walter says, black fog drifts in the breeze as they ride towards his trailer.

Bill sits with his legs crossed and hands held around his knee. He taps his foot on the dashboard.

"You having a good morning Mr. Gardner?"

"I told you, call me Bill." Bill switches legs, still holding his hands over his knee. "My morning has been good," Bill smirks, "but my evening was remarkable." He sits up in the truck's bench seat and situates his over-sized black toupee. The pitch of Bill's voice raises, "Do you remember Carlito?" He straightens his black dress pants and tightens his pinstripe vest against his yellow button shirt, "The younger man I've been seeing these past three months."

"I didn't know it had already been three months, but yeah I can picture him," Walter says. Carlito showed up to the estate one day with the lawn-care crew. He was a

new hire and within the first few hours Bill had shown Carlito his private apartment in the shelter.

“Well, last night was his twenty-first birthday,” Bill giggles, “And I asked him to move in with me. Isn't this great.” He grabs Walter's arm, but then quickly collects himself, crossing his legs and dusting off his black polished shoes.

“What about Mrs. Gardner?” Walter squints.

“That is why I called you last night, I didn't think about her.” Bill rubs his eyebrows. “I wanted to ask you a favor,” Bill looks down rubbing his calf. “Could you, could you get rid of her? Ugh.” He shakes his head, “That sounds so bad, Walter, but she wouldn't understand. It'd destroy her. Not to mention what all the women of the town would say about her.”

Walter slows down as they pull to the door of the shelter. His truck stutters off. He looks at Bill still squinting his eyes.

“I'd pay you of course.” Bill says. “Enough that you could buy a house like mine in town, pay for it cash.” They get out of the truck. “Free and clear, think about your son.”

Walter closes the truck door and nods his head at Bill as they enter the shelter.

“I'd give you enough not to have to work ever again, I love him Walter. Don't you understand that?” Bill closes the door and turns around to Walter. “It's stupid, but he makes me young again. I want to give him things and take him around the world, I love him Walter, I just plain love him and he loves me.” Bill turns the light switch on and grabs two beers from the refrigerator. Walter opens his beer using his lighter. He only smokes with Mr. Gardner and never buys his own pack.

“How would I do this, Bill?” Walter sits on the couch that looks into the second master bedroom of the shelter. He looks around the living room, fully equipped with a flat screen television bigger than his truck's windshield, speakers as tall as Ray that when turned up vibrate the floors of Walter's trailer. Every night, Bill would bring home a new date. Since Carlito, though, it has been loud salsa music mixed with rap of some sorts, Walter can never understand a word of anything but country music.

“I don't know. I was going to leave the how up to you.” Bill gets the bottle opener out from the drawer near the stove and opens his beer.

The shelter's walls are bright green and blue. Building it took two years, sixty feet wide and fifty feet long, Bill hired a crew to build it out of a rare steel and bury it inside a hill behind Walter's trailer at the end of the pecan grove. He bought the equipment from them and stored it in one of the three barns scattered around the seven-hundred-acre estate. He bought it telling Walter if he ever wanted to add on, then Walter had all the tools to do it with. The shelter has four bedrooms with four full baths, and a kitchen and living room the size of Walter's trailer. Marble statues and oil paintings hang from the wall. Carlito steps from one of the master bedrooms, shirtless and drapes himself over Bill like the branches of a willow tree.

“What the fuck Bill?” Walter jumps up. “Why is he here?” Walter puts his beer on the white granite counter and walks to the door.

“Wait,” Bill puts his hand against the frame. “He knows. We both want you to do it.” Bill backs away and hugs Carlito. “He's been living here for about a month, and the nights we spend together are filled with more love and joy than my lifetime shared with Elaine.” Carlito kisses Bill's neck and cheek.

Walter grabs his beer. He sits down on the white leather sofa. The bottle turns up and before he puts it on the table, Carlito has another opened and is waiting standing beside him. Walter drinks it without stopping, and Carlito has one more.

“What makes you think I could do this?” He takes the beer.

Carlito says softly, “Bill trusts you,” walking to get Walter another bottle. “He says you can do anything.”

Walter finishes his beer, and grabs the next readied by Carlito.

“Eight hundred thousand,” Bill says as Walter sits back down. He sits next to him crossing his legs. “That's enough to build your own house and still live comfortably with Ray, maybe even enough to pay for his college,” he laughs, “as long as you don't spend it all at the Pink Pony.” Bill nudges Walter's side. Walter pictures Elaine's bright red hair and tanned skin. He thinks about the cool breeze brushing his cheeks as he stares through the magnolia flowers at her perky breasts. Fake, but perky. Her dimples in her ass whenever she walked from the pool to the house. He closes his eyes and smells lavender.

“One million.” Walter finishes his beer.

“Deal,” Carlito reaches his hand out. Walter looks down at it and then looks at Bill, who is smiling.

“Deal.”

Carlito cooks steaks on the stove in a cast iron skillet with melted butter and mushrooms. He puts potatoes into the oven, and when they are done, pulls them out and tops them with bacon, sour cream, and chives. Walter watches him from the sofa as Bill dances behind Carlito to salsa music. Carlito opens a bottle of red wine and pours three glasses. He braises asparagus in a separate skillet and boils full ears of corn in a pot.

“Isn't he something else,” Bill turns drinking his wine. “Some nights it's French cuisine, other nights we dine in Spain, or India. That's one of the reason I love him, he always surprises me. Elaine never wanted anything to do with me after Tyler drowned.” Bill raises his wine to the ceiling fan, “Ten years ago last month. He was a good kid. A spoiled bully, but she made him that way. Wouldn't stop breast feeding him until he was damn near twelve. You remember Walt, that was right before I got her those tits.” He slaps Walter's arm. “I know you watch her out there sometime, hell I don't mind. That's what made me think you could do it. You know, get close and make it look like an accident.”

Walter rubs the back of his neck. He smells the mushrooms, remembering the one time Elaine and him almost had sex. Bill was on a business trip to Atlanta, or so he thought then. Tyler's funeral was a few days before. They sat on the porch drinking wine and holding hands talking about Audrey Hepburn movies, eating fried mushrooms Elaine had warmed up the oven. Walter didn't know any, but he just sat agreeing with Elaine. When she decided it was getting late and walked to the door, Walter followed behind her watching the cheeks of her butt jiggle from her tight white shorts. She kissed him and closed the door.

Bill fills his wine glass. “She thinks I'm going to check in on one of our Subway stores in Idaho, and that I'll be gone for a few days. I got a ticket and a hotel reservation. I'll stay here with Carlito and use the hotel as an alibi.”

The steak is juicy. Bill and Carlito continue to talk about how much they love each other and how it would be better if Elaine was not “around.” They keep saying that, “around.” Walter shakes both their hands and goes back to his trailer.

The trailer smells like tacos and Ray is watching another detective show. The announcer is talking about a chemical compound the killer used to cover his fingerprints, and how he burned the scene as he left to cover any additional tracks. “Hm,” Walter walks into his bedroom and closes the door.

*

Pillow cases are soaked in blood when Walter wakes up; the duct tape fell off and reopened his nose. He tosses the pillows in the corner on the floor with his bed sheets. He opens his bathroom door and turns on the light. Twenty bats stir and swarm passed his head, hitting him.

“Shit,” Walter swats around his head as the bats funnel out of the hole. He hears Ray tumbling down the hall and opening the door.

“What happened?”

“God damned bats,” Walter slams the bathroom door shut and the door cracks busting one of the hinges, making it hang. He thinks about the years of Ray being on Medicaid, the days of hunting for dented cans and day old meat. He remembers shifting through shirts at the thrift store looking for any without underarm stains or tears. He thinks about the birthday parties at McDonald's where the only present he could afford was a cone of ice cream. “That's it I'm doing it.”

“You okay?” Ray asks as Walter grabs his clothes, thudding each step out of the trailer.

Elaine is outside tanning nude. Walter parts the magnolias and watches. The breeze is cool, and birds sing nearby. It's as if the sun radiates from her nipples and glistening skin. She looks up, waving at Walter.

“Walter, my dear, I'm so glad you've come by.” Elaine buckles her top, stuffing in her breast. “Bill has left for a few days and I need someone to drive me to my appointment with Dr. Stone. My God, Walter, what happened to your face?” She caresses his face pressing gently on the edges of his wounds. She turns and covers herself in a white lace robe, Walter can see her black bikini under it.

“Sure Mrs. Gardner, what time do you want to leave?” Walter says looking at his feet.

“Now. We must leave now I don't want to sit with all the weird-dos that come into that chiropractor's office. I absolutely love Dr. Stone, but her clientele,” she wiggles her hands in disgust, “those people smell funny, Walter.” Elaine smells like lavender and brown sugar. Walter closes his eyes as she takes his hands. “I'll get dressed and you can drive me in Bill's Mercedes.”

After the chiropractor appointment, Elaine suggests that she and Walter have dinner together. She tells him she wants to cook for him. Before dinner, Elaine tells him to relax on the couch. A few minutes later, she comes down the main staircase in an elegant black skirt with a loose, low cut blouse. They eat baked salmon by candlelight.

The wax from the candle drips to the bottom of the wick as they laugh about the bobcat. Elaine tells Walter about when she was young and went hunting with her father. She fell asleep only to wake in time to kick the wood deer stand as her father was taking aim at, as he had said, the biggest buck he had ever seen. Before the flames flicker out Walter kisses her neck gently. She moans, and curls herself in his lap. He picks her up and lays her on the couch.

He wonders if he they will sleep together. How it will feel touching her naked

nipples, and tracing her dimples with his fingers. Her arms are soft. He reaches around her back, and fumbles with the zipper.

Elaine stands up, "I'm sorry, Walter. I can't, I'm married and that just is not me."

Walter reaches for her hand as he stands beside her, "I could stay for one night." He looks in her green eyes, and she pulls away.

"I think it best if we both went to bed." She pats his chest, turning.

Headlights from Walter's truck reflect off his trailer. He slams his hands down on the steering wheel, spitting and cursing, "You stupid fuck, should have just laid her down." He goes to bed, the moonlight casting shadows of Carlito and Bill on his bedroom wall.

As the morning sun lingers through the long leaf pines and magnolia blossoms in a slight orange and pink hue, Walt's truck whines and doesn't crank. Bill cracks open the shelter door, sticks his hand out and waves Walt towards him. Even from the truck, Walt can see Bill's blue veins scraggly and twisted. His fingernails were trimmed and not the usually yellow from the years of cigarettes. Walt has noticed Bill seemingly happier since Carlito. He showers more.

"It's a lot of money," Walt takes his cap off and rubs his head. "Maybe a fire, she would just sleep and the smoke would get her." He pictures Elaine laying on her back in bed, a see-through white lace gown that rises above her inner thigh. One hand holding her stomach, the other resting on her thigh as smoke builds around her. Peaceful.

"How'd it go?" Bill says, closing the door behind Walt. "Are we good?"

Walt faces Bill and shakes his head. Carlito, behind him, screams "I told you he couldn't do it. He thinks he loves her," Carlito spits on the floor. "Dumb bastard. Let me

get one of my cousins who pours concrete.”

Bill steps around Walt and holds Carlito, “He will do it, we can't expect him to rush.” Bill shushes Carlito and softens his voice, “It's a lot to ask from him, but Walt is the only man I trust to do this. He'll get it done.” Bill turns to Walt and smiles, winking his left eye.

*

Five days pass and Elaine sun bathes nude beside the pool. Walt is watching her, again. He looks around and sees noone. He takes the spool of weed-eater line and wraps it around his hand, guesses the length of ten inches, cuts it and wraps the other hand. He holds the tight plastic green line by his waist. She is lying on her back, eyes closed. He sneaks around making sure to miss the fallen magnolia leaves and stands over her staring. The shadow from his arm slowly crosses her face, and lingers around her neck.

Walt thinks of another time when Bill was on vacation. Him, Elaine, and Ray playing in the park, Ray had to be around six or seven. Elaine wore a light pink dress that picked up and flowed with each gust of wind. They held hands and walked around the park, letting Ray climb on trees at random. Walt felt sorry for her. He wanted to give her more than an empty marriage, but Elaine always seemed one step away.

A slam of a door startles Walt. He releases one side of the line. It spins and curls on the ground, beside his boot.

“Mrs. Gardner,” a voice says from around the front of the house. “Mrs. Gardner, it's Sheriff Brady.”

Elaine sits up quickly and rushes through the back-patio door. Walt watches her dimples dance as she runs and puts on a pink robe. The door opens and Sheriff Brady

steps inside. Walt cranks the weed-eater and works his way around the house and down the driveway. Brady stays for about an hour and leaves. Elaine stands on the porch and waves Walt to her. Her hair blows in the wind and across Walt's face, lavender shampoo.

“That field behind the lake,” Elaine sips wine, “it looks horrible. The grass is so tall. Don't you usually burn those fields?” Walt nods. “I just don't know what to do. Bill has been gone and hasn't called, I told the Sheriff this isn't like him.” She lowers her head. “I need something to keep me busy.”

“I'll take care of the field.” Walt thinks about holding her hand but he turns and walks away, picturing her standing with one arm stretched out towards him mouthing, “come back.” He glances over his shoulder, seeing the wisp of her robe as the front door closes.

June's noon sun beats down through the straw hat and long sleeve cotton shirt Walt is wearing. He pours small puddles of gas along the edge of the field, far enough from the pecans but close enough to keep the fire contained to one field. He climbs onto the baby blue tractor, it shakes and grinds into gear. Walt makes out the outline of his trailer through the pecan grove. He lights a cigarette, the last of the ones given to him by Bill, closes his eyes and inhales.

His shoulders relax. He shifts his back to have more of a lounge on the tractor. A few silver bass jump from the lake, shadows of alligator gars and catfish dart along the muddy bottom. Walt finishes and flicks the cigarette near the trail of gas. Erupting, eating the dry grass edge within seconds, Walt looks at the opening and steers the tractor towards the hole. In the distance he sees Elaine walking towards him, large golden tray in hand and two glasses filled with lemonade. The breeze lifts her white dress exposing

more of her. It brushes Walt's beard. The heat hazes her image like the fumes of gas. Her red hair disappears behind the flames as they close Walt's exit.

Fire encircles Walt. He strains his boots against the metal brake pedal. Shifting his head left and right, standing, trying to look over the burning barricade now ten feet high. Walt cranks the steering wheel, aiming for the lake behind the lingering flames as small rats and animals run burning, spreading the fire to the pecan grove. He grinds the tractor into a higher gear, crouches behind the steering column and covers his head with his arms. It speeds through, splashing in the lake.

"Elaine, run!" Walt yells searching for a bare spot of shore vacant of flames. He pulls himself up and looks for Elaine. "Maybe she ran off." He looks towards the house but doesn't see her.

Walt runs to the main house, slamming his fists on the oak doors. He frantically presses the doorbell. Elaine opens the door, her breast visible through her shirt. Walt leans around her and grabs the phone, and calls the fire department.

*

"I'm glad you didn't get hurt," Elaine rubs her leg against Walt. Otis Redding plays on a vinyl record. "My heart stopped when you ran through that door." She scratches his beard softly.

Walt reaches around her head, rolling on top of her on the floor and kisses her. They make love as the record skips "Sitting on the dock." He lies on his back gasping, heart thudding against his chest, Elaine tangles her fingers in his chest hair. Walt was still catching his breath when the phone rings and Elaine says it is for him.

"Dad," Ray says in a whisper with a grunt. "I'm hurt."

“Where are you?” Walt throws on his pants and shirt before interrupting with, “I’m on my way.”

He tells Elaine and she offers to ride to the trailer with him. She holds his hand as the truck spits gravel and pecan trees fling pass the window. He skids to a stop. The headlights show a white front door dripping with blood. Walt runs up the steps and sees two broken boards, splintered, bloody. He kicks open the front door and sees Ray, fetal by the couch and holding his stomach.

“Call 911,” Walt yells kneeling beside Ray. He lifts his neck and helps him roll onto his back. He looks at his hands, blood pours from between his fingers. Walt puts one hand over Ray’s. He looks down and sees his ankle twisted, facing backwards.

“They’re on the way.” Elaine opens cabinets and slams them shut. “Don’t you have any towels?”

“In the bathroom, down the hall.” Walt jerks his head towards the back.

Walt whispers in Ray’s ear and starts to hum. Walt hums to Ray when the ambulance gets to the trailer and when they finally wheel him through the Emergency Room doors. He holds his hand until a nurse reaches out, grabbing his shoulder and hands him a plastic green clipboard. He watches the surgery doors close, and turns to see Elaine waiting for him. Crying, she opens her arms and hugs him. Elaine whispers, “I love you.”

Walt squeezes her tight and tells her the same. He takes a deep breath of lavender and her hair tickles the inside of his nose. They sit, Walt’s arm around Elaine and her head resting against his chest until the rustic swing of doors puts them to sleep.

By two in the morning, the surgeon nudges them and tells Walt of the success. He

asks Walt how the accident happened.

Walt looks down shaking his head, “Some wood rotted and he fell through the porch.”

“That would explain the wood I took out of his intestines. Must have pierced his stomach and when he landed it broke his ankle.” The surgeon leans down and pats Walt on the arm, “I know it has been a long day, but we are lucky to have your son still with us.” When the surgeon leaves, a nurse shows Elaine and Walt to Ray's room. Beeps and the hiss of oxygen drown out what the nurse tells Walt. He walks to the bed and holds Ray's hand. Elaine steps to the side, holding Ray's hand in one and Walt's in the other.

Sun rays pierce the space between the green curtains and wake Walt. He sits up in the chair beside Ray, but doesn't see Elaine.

“I asked if she would get me some water,” Ray's voice cracks. Walt rubs his beard and gets up hugging Ray.

“How you feeling?”

“Sore.”

“Need anything?”

“Wouldn't mind my iPad,” Ray shifts in the bed. “It has all my shows on it.”

*

Bill and Carlito are both standing outside the shelter door when Walt gets to his trailer. Carlito's arms are flailing, shooting up and down as Bill waves to Walt asking to talk to him. Walking up, Walt can hear the conversation.

“I'm sick of living in that hole!” Carlito kicks his foot down. “You promised to take me to the beach!” Bill sways his head and tries to place his hands on Carlito's

shoulders, but he shrugs them off. “No, no more. I'll go up there myself and kill her. Then we kill that useless idiot and his boy,” Carlito rubs Bill's shoulders. “We can be together. Noone will bother us.”

Bill shushes Carlito, “In time.”

“Don't you think we should go inside? Won't work if someone spots you out here,” Walt says opening the door and walking in.

“I don't think you should be telling me anything.” Carlito says, his accent fumbling his words. “You get no,” he slaps his palm like counting cash.

“Calm down,” Bill says walking through the door, Carlito arguing, follows behind him.

“There was an accident yesterday,” Walt pauses. “Some wind kicked up while I was burning a field and almost ate the whole property.”

“We heard the commotion.” Bill reaches for Carlito's hand, but he pulls it away.

“Are you going to kill her or not?” Carlito steps forward. “Or do I need to take care of it.”

Walt grabs a beer and comes back into the living room where Carlito and Bill sit on the white couch.

“I'm going to do it. Was going to do it yesterday matter of fact. But Ray got hurt,” Walt takes a drink.

“What happened?” Bill says looking worried.

“Fell through—”

“I don't care,” Carlito stands up, stomping to Walt. “I don't care about you or your punto son,” He reaches out and pokes Walt in the chest. “We have been waiting, but

every day you say something else.” Carlito turns to Bill, his finger digging into Walt's chest. “If this retard won't do the job, then I know people that will.” He turns back to Walt. “And after they finish her, I'll send them after you.”

Walt looks at Bill and in an instant grabs Carlito's hand and pulls him close. He wraps his arm around Carlito's neck, snap. Limp, Carlito falls to the floor.

Bill stumbles from the couch, dropping to his knees a few feet from Carlito and crawls to him. He reaches for his foot and pulls himself closer. He traces his arms across his chest and up to his face, then turns to Walt.

“I'll fucking kill you.” Bill looks at the kitchen and Walt runs towards it for a knife. Bill grabs his leg and trips him, bringing Walt to the ground with his knees cracking against the cement floor. He swings his fist around him and hits Bill in the top of his head. Bill rolls on his back, still holding Walt's leg. They twist and fight on the ground until Walt pins Bill's arms down with his shins and pulls the flat screen T.V. on Bill's neck. Glass and plastic shatter with pieces dusting in Walt's eyes.

Bill's boots scrape the floor as he gasps for breath creating lines of white cement in a half circle, like dance steps or marks on a basketball court. Walt hears him gurgle and Bill's boots are still.

Walt brushes his eyes. He straightens his clothes and walks out of the shelter, leaving the two men breathless. He catches his breath while walking to his trailer. Brakes squeak. Sheriff Brady turns the corner greeting Walt and taking off his hat.

“I heard about the accident,” He says. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Seems so. Doctors got him in the bed now, just wanted me to get his computer thing.”

Brady squints, “Looks like you took a few yourself.”

“Bobcat,” Walt says walking towards the front of the trailer. “Anything you need, or were you just coming to check on Ray?”

“Nope, I knew they had him up there and figured you would be with him.” Brady turns to the shelter door, pointing. “Elaine told me about the shelter, and figured I should check there.” He turns back to Walt. “Looking for Bill. Haven't seen him have you?”

The Day William Died

It was the Battle of Shiloh. Close to home, William thought. Blood seeped like water into his wool coat. His leg, separated from his body, and lying a few feet from his head still wears his worn boot. He was cold. He thought of Grace and Rosie. It was still daylight; he saw clouds pierced by sunlight, lifting souls to heaven. The smell of burnt black powder grew stale around him.

“Grace,” he closed his eyes. The sound of cannon fire thundered behind him, in front of him, and around each side. His right ear popped and he felt warm blood trickle down his neck.

One year before the war started, William, Grace and Rosie moved to the small shack in northern Mississippi. A spot that touched the Delta and thick forest. He had twelve families living on the estate. Each with a small house and garden where the wives would grow vegetables. Grace would brag about the tomatoes and the size of squash.

“Bigger than any of those gulf gardens.” She smiled and squeezed his arm at breakfast.

At lunch, the wives brought the men, who were working the cotton field, water and food. They sat under a line of magnolia trees that lined each side of the vast field. When the flowers bloomed, William would take some to Grace. By the time winter came, the house was covered in white magnolia flowers. Rosie would continue the tradition, even days before hooded men would come burn the farm and kill her infant brother.

William shivered, the blood now a cold puddle pooling under him. Someone

crawls over his jagged leg, he doesn't have the strength to scream in pain. Their body inches over him. One breath, two, and then three. Eternity is stretched over him, clawing at the dirt and blood. He grunted when they kicked off his rib cage, the snap pierced his lungs.

“They'll kill us if we stay, William,” Grace said holding his face in her hands. “We know it isn't this skin color that makes us human,” she pinched her arm and pulled at the copper flesh. She grabbed William's hand and placed it on her chest. “It's our heart. One day their hear's may change, but now my love,” she turned to Rosie. “We have to live long enough to see that day.”

William packed four suitcases, one for each of them, and another where he stored what little cash he had and one muzzle-loaded pistol. It had a brass outlay and a cherry oak handle. The muzzle was long and black, cut like an octagon. He shouldered his rifle and lifted Rosie in the cart. Grace sat beside her and held her head tight against her chest, aged fourteen, she had her first menstrual cycle near a two weeks ago.

Rain fell like waves, it is the reason the townspeople will wait two days before burning the house and everything William left. The cart's wheels got stuck and one point William, with the family, had to camp covered in branches and mud for six days while he cut and shaped a makeshift axle with his ax, the previous breaking trying to outrun something in the night. The trip took two weeks, but when the family emerged from the magnolias and pines, William's slaves greeted them with blankets and warm food. The next day he gave them freedom, and suggested they could stay with their families. He would give them a small salary; this was before the war. When war came, all the men were considered friends to William and choose to fight with him and for those families.

William cannot see the sun any longer. An effect of both the blood now in his eyes and the darkness of night setting in. His nose has been swollen closed and his breath gurgled between his lips.

“William,” he heard a voice.

“Grace?” William coughed, blood filled his mouth.

“Save your strength,” the voice gasped at sight of him. “I’m here friend. Let’s get you home.”

William opened his eyes, the stranger rubbed his hand across and cleared the blood.

“Frank...Franklin?” William sputtered. Franklin, the only man that was still alive and who had followed William from the cotton farm, twisted William on his side. The blood poured from his mouth. Franklin rolled him back over onto a gurney. He lifted. William’s head elevated and drooped against his chest.

“Hold on,” Franklin said. The tourniquet Franklin put on his leg slowed the bleeding, but before they leave the battlefield, William will be dead. Franklin dragged his body to the steps of the farm house. Grace fell to her knees. Her and William’s son cries from inside the house, born four months after William and the men left.

All of the women gathered the next day and buried William. Rosie sang. Grace and William Jr. cried. The crippled man shoveled the dirt.

Between the Pines

Ronald Turner, Ron to friends, has been sober for two years until now. His first taste of whiskey sits in the bottle, staring at him. Like trapped sunlight. It's within reach. His mouth salivates. His palms sweat. Sheriff Brady left Ron's farmhouse thirty minutes ago with Dewayne, Ron's younger brother locked in handcuffs, crying from the back seat, screaming "Ronnie help."

"What now?" Ron says, the whiskey glows in the dimly lit kitchen.

Dewayne is what local people call "touched." Their mother told Ron it was because Dewayne was touched by God's finger when he was a baby and that made his brain sensitive. "Careful with talking to yourself," Ron nods at the bottle. "Someone might think you got what Momma had." Ron tilts his head towards the bottle. The dust on it, like pollen.

"He couldn't have done it." He reaches for the bottle. He holds it in his hands, explaining. "He didn't touch that girl, not my little brother."

He pictures the first drink being sweet, a memory of a warm day. He would close his eyes, lick his mustache for the extra taste. The second would go fast. He looks around his family's farmhouse, the same one he and Dewayne grew up in. He sees pictures of his Mom and Dad, Diane and Charles. Charles stands in the black and white photo with a baseball bat pressed against his shoulder, smiling.

Damn he was dark, Ron says to the whiskey bottle, still closed and covered in dust.

The farm house is sun-faded blue with white shutters and a porch that wraps around it. The pig fields are behind the house, and Dewayne's chicken coop is in the front, near the driveway. Ron made the chickens Dewayne's responsibility when he got the farm. Dewayne loves showing the school kids his coop and chickens. He runs with them, chasing the chickens through the pines and the yard. Kudzu creeps from the edge of the gravel driveway and covers oak and pine tree trunks around the coop.

"You played with Jackie Robinson." He twirls the whiskey in the bottle. "Then you buy a fucking pig farm in Cyrus, Mississippi, to stick us. Thanks." He salutes with the bottle to the picture. Baseball memorabilia from the National Negro Baseball League is decorated in the dust and cobwebs staggered around the house.

He looks at a picture of Charles in his Indianapolis Clowns uniform, another with him standing beside Jackie Robinson in a suit, Diane and Charles on their wedding day, the whole family standing in front of the farm house. In the picture, Dewayne is playing with toys on the ground while Charles stands behind Ron with his hand on his shoulder. Diane stands to the side, her hands grasped in front of her. She's looking off to something, not in the picture. He opens the bottle.

"At least you had good whiskey." He sloshes it between his cheeks before swallowing and sitting back down. Charles died three years ago, leaving Ron the farm and responsibility of taking care of Dewayne. Ron remembers when Diane first got sick, and when Charles bought the first bottle of whiskey. Charles once gave Ron a signed baseball card of Jackie Robinson. It was after a particularly brutal beating. The phone rings.

"I need you to come to the station," Sheriff Brady tells Ron.

“What's going on?”

“There's been an incident with your brother after processing. Just get here as soon as you can.”

Ron hangs up the phone and drinks the rest of the whiskey. He takes a deep breath. Should have poured it out.

"Lloyd, I got to go see the Sheriff," Ron yells up the stairs to Lloyd, a farm hand that rents a room. He fumbles with his red flannel shirt and boots. "You hear me?" He yells again but gets no answer and leaves. His green 1978 Ford Crown Victoria cranks and spits gravel from the driveway behind him. Ten years old and still pumping, he thinks.

Dewayne is three years younger than Ron, but his mind functions at a third-grade level. Ron thinks he remembers when Dwayne was born. It was a night of pacing for his father between the windows of the waiting room. Ron played with a toy truck in the corner. This was nine years before his mother was committed. Before the voices called to her.

Charles had her committed when one of the voices told her to walk Ron and Dewayne into the pond behind the house at midnight in December. The boys were waist deep when Charles noticed Diane was not in bed and came running outside. She left that night. Charles built a fence around the pond, and it became their second pig field.

“She just needs a little rest,” Charles would tell them the first few months. “The hospital is just going to take care of her while she gets better, she'll be home soon.” Charles stopped taking them to visit her, and eventually the story turned into Momma is resting on the moon. She died in the hospital two years before Ron turned eighteen, and

Charles started drinking. Empty whiskey bottles started taking the place of family pictures and baseball memorabilia.

When he was old enough, Ron moved to Memphis, Tennessee, leaving Charles and Dewayne behind. He opened a mechanic shop. He was good at fixing things; he wasn't good at keeping the money. It failed like his first two marriages, buried under bottles of whiskey.

*

His headlights bounce off the trees and signs as they pass. Rain starts against the windshield, and Ron's wipers squeak with each rise and fall. He squints, trying to see through the rain. Ron turns his lights on bright as they flash against trucks stopped in front of him. He slams on his brakes. The car hydroplanes, turning sideways before spinning around and stopping in front of a roadblock of four lifted trucks, and six men standing in front of them. Two vehicles turn on their lights and Ron raises his hand over his brow.

"Everything okay?" Ron gets out. "Anyone hurt?" He raises his hand back up.

"Not yet," one man says, the others yell in agreement. "Think you forgot how we do things since you left for Memphis."

"Clyde?" Ron steps forward. "Clyde Johnson, that you?" He turns his head still holding his hand above his brow. "That must mean the two in the truck are your oldest boys. Who else you got out here standing in the rain?" He lifts his shoulders and shrugs. "You know Dewayne didn't do anything to Lovie. This is some kind of—"

"Don't you say her fucking name. If my daughter's name comes out of your mouth again, I'll cut out your tongue." Clyde kicks the pavement as he walks to Ron. A hard hit

on his lower back, sends Ron to the ground. "I'm coming for your brother next." He breaks Ron's nose with one hit. Blood dilutes with the rain on the asphalt. The men surround Ron and beat him. One has a baseball bat and hands it to Clyde. Ron looks up through his swelling eyes and sees the bat coming down. Again. And again.

"When I get to your brother," Clyde stands over Ron. "I'm gonna kill him, nigger." He spits on Ron and swings the baseball bat above his head and onto Ron's.

They were friends once, Ron and Clyde. Where there was one, there was the other right beside him. Fall of their senior year a new girl transferred to Cyrus High. It went, as it always does, she picked one and not the other. She just so happened to be wife one of two for Ron, and Clyde's current one.

*

Ron wakes up in a ditch, bleeding, his right ankle bruised, and starting to swell. It's still dark. The men are gone, and one of his tires is flat. He struggles to drag himself to the car and open the door. It chimes, the keys still in the ignition. He gets them and turns for the trunk. He limps to it, using the car for balance. Opening it, he grabs the spare tire, jack, and tire iron. Not one fucking car? Back-ass road, middle of nowhere town, Ron thinks, slamming the trunk. He drags his ankle across the asphalt and kneels beside the tire.

Ron grips the iron and loosens each lug nut. The jack skids over the asphalt and his knuckles scrap the pavement as it lifts the car.

"What else?" He raises his arms. "What else? Huh? What else could fucking happen? Is this fun for you? Go ahead, get your laughs." Ron draws back the tire iron and smashes his windshield.

He falls to his knees crying. Lightning cracks a nearby tree. He takes off his boot, and sees his ankle now swollen, stretching his skin tight as a tick. The skin is purple and black. Blood runs from his nose into his mouth and he spits it on the pavement. It swirls with the splashes of rain.

One morning, when Ron was fourteen, he and Dewayne were waiting for the school bus.

“Look there,” Dewayne said, pointing. “What are they doing?” Ron looked over. Four kids were surrounding something, sticks in hand.

“Don't worry about it.” Ron put his hand on Dewayne's back and turned him around. “Ready to go back to school?” he asked, smiling. “Summer wasn't long enough, huh?”

“Not really,” Dewayne shrugged his shoulders. “Let's go see.” He started walking to the group.

“The bus will be here soon,” Ron turned, but Dewayne was almost there. He sighed and followed.

Dewayne screamed, “No!” Ron saw him push his way between the boys and kneel on the ground.

“Move,” the kids yelled and kicked Dewayne. “Get up, retard!”

Ron jumped on the back of the biggest one, making him fall. He gripped his books by the spine and cracked them against the boy's skull. The others screamed and ran as the bus pulled up and the blood trickled down the back of the kid's head to his chin, even while Ron kept swinging his book. The driver had to pull Ron off the boy. He was

suspended from school for one week because Dewayne wanted to protect a dead dog, but they never called Dewayne "retard" again. Not where Ron could hear.

*

With the tire back on, Ron drives slowly to the Sheriff's office. The road fuzzes around him at times, but he makes it and parks. He closes his eyes thinking of the other two bottles waiting under the sink. Brady meets him at the door.

"What the hell happened?" He wraps his arm under Ron and helps him to a nearby chair.

"Deer," Ron says. He sees Amanda working the receptionist desk, and nods towards her. Her red hair and cotton white skin catch his eye like the first day she walked in school. The only white girl he ever liked. Most didn't give him a second look yet alone take a ring from him and accept his last name. She answers the phone, turning her back to him.

"Are you alright? That ankle looks rough." Sheriff Brady says.

"What's going on? Why am I here?"

"It's Dewayne."

Ron stands up, "Where is he? What's wrong? Is he Okay?"

"He's going to be fine. Just a small fight," Brady says, looking at Ron's ankle.

"But we need to get you looked at."

"I'm good," Ron tries to take a step but falls back into the chair. "Can I see him?"

"After I get you taken care of at the hospital, I'll take you both home. Just leave the car here, and I'll get it towed."

"Thanks, Brady." Ron shakes his hand.

Brady was there when Ron broke his forearm sliding into home. He scored, but never played again. Baseball was the one thing Charles stayed sober for, the one thing that connected them.

*

Ron looks around the hospital room. This place smells like someone painted the walls with shit. He sees a jar of cotton balls, tongue depressors, and gray drawers labeled with white stickers. Look at him, thinks he's something now that he's Sheriff. Brady stands outside the door talking to the doctor. Damn, need more whiskey.

He walks in the room, "They said to stay off it, but you will be good in a few weeks." Ron stands up, with Brady's help. "Now, let's get you back to your brother."

"If no one else has beat him you mean."

"I have him in a cell by himself. He's okay. Just a black eye and busted lip." They walk to the Sheriff's car. Ron sits in the passenger seat.

"You know, I was at bat when you broke your arm." Brady lights a cigarette and offers one to Ron. He declines. "Yea, they had just caught my fly ball, making it two outs when you slid not five feet from me. That snap," Brady inhales, "I remember the snap most of all. Like a gator on chicken. Just, Snap!" Ron jumps in his seat. "And I look down to see your bone."

"Yea. It hurt."

"How'd you get the schools to start the field trips to your farm?" Brady asks. Blue eyes, brown hair typical white guy. Do I have to listen to his fat ass the whole ride? Think he has a tail like grandma said all white people do?

"Just asked them."

“Did it help business?”

“Yea, the Halloween shows help too.”

“That's right.” Brady slaps his steering wheel. “I took my boy out there two weeks ago. That haunted hay ride was something else.”

“Yea.”

"Clowns jumped on the back and were chasing us. Had Ty tucked under my arm the whole ride? He had fun."

“That's what it's for.” Ron says. “Let me see those lights at work.”

“Can't. Emergencies only.”

“Come on,” Ron nods his head, “let's see.”

“We're almost there.”

At the Sheriff's office, Brady lets Dewayne out. When he sees Ron, he runs to him, hugs him, picking him up while doing it. Six foot seven inches, two hundred and eighty pounds of sensitive. Think this person could rape a little girl?

“Ronnie,” Dewayne puts him down. “Are we going home?”

"That's right," Ron says, looking at Dewayne's swollen eye and a bloody lip. Now dry and crusted.

“Good. They are not nice here.” Dewayne points at Brady. “He is.”

“You shouldn't point, remember,” Ron says. “Now just wait right here while I talk to the Sheriff. Understand?”

“What if...”

“Nothing will happen. I'll be right there.” Ron steps in Brady's office, he leaves the door open to see Dewayne.

Brady walks to the back of his desk, opens a drawer and pours two glasses of whiskey, leaving the bottle out. He walks back to the front, turns around, and hands Ron a glass.

"Dewayne told me it wasn't him, and I believe him." Brady says. "Says it was Lloyd." He drinks and slams it against the desk, "Says he made him watch."

"I always thought something was off about him. I'll kill him."

"Now just wait." Brady holds his hands up. "When's the last time you saw him?" Ron takes a drink and grabs the bottle pouring another, "Not since yesterday afternoon after the last school bus left. He was feeding the pigs."

"Mind if I come over and take a look?" Asks Brady.

"I don't care." Ron looks behind him at Dewayne. "I should've known when I found all those little girls' clothes, but he said they were his daughter's."

"I'll take you home, and maybe it'll be enough to make sure no more deer jump out."

"Maybe."

Ron walks out of the office, bottle in hand, with Brady following. He gets Dewayne's coat that is draped over the back of a chair and puts it on him. Amanda still has her back turned from him, whispering on the phone.

"Ready?" Ron asks.

"Yep. Gotta feed the chickens when we get home." Dewayne says, one eye swollen shut and smiling blood washed teeth.

On the ride to the farm, Ron and Dewayne sit in the back. Dewayne leans his head on Ron. It reminds him of riding in the back seat when they were kids. He drinks the

bottle empty and lets it roll around the back seat of Brady's car.

Ron sees the black smoke towering over the trees before they pull in the driveway. Brady's car slings gravel as it curves towards the house. Ron looks over as Dewayne lifts his head screaming, "No!"

The chicken coop is on fire. Brady uses his radio and calls the fire department, but it is too late. Flames run out of the coop, until falling still, flickering. The ashes of feathers catch the breeze. Embers burn as the wood cracks and pops over the sound of coyote howls. A flame lingers in the wind uncovering the surrounding pines. Brady searches the house, barn, and surrounding fields. He does not find Lloyd, or whoever started the fire.

The fire department and police leave as the sun shines through the burnt pines and smoking ground.

Ron sits on the front porch with Dewayne under his arm, still crying.

"You remember when I broke my arm?" He looks down and lifts Dewayne's head. "Well when I broke my arm, I knew I would never play baseball again. I didn't know what I'd do. So Pops took me out here and sat me down just like we are now." Ron looks around. "He told me that Turners did not fall. We never failed, or quit when things are tough. He said it was something in our blood, something that wouldn't let us. You know what he said?"

Dewayne wipes his tears away, "What?"

Ron smiles and hugs him, "He said we never fall, just find new ways to get back up just a little bit better than before. This won't make us fall, little brother, just help us get up a little better." Dewayne leans back smiling. Ron stands up and yells, "You hear that?"

We ain't falling!" Dewayne stands and repeats, as they both start laughing. He walks to the kitchen, opens the cabinet, grabs one of the bottles, and pours it down the drain. He reaches for the second. It'll be good for an emergency, right? He closes the doors as Dewayne walks in.

"I saw him, you know?" He cocks his feet and looks at them.

"I know," Ron steps forward. "We don't have to talk about it."

"Yea," he keeps his eyes down. "I saw him with Miss Bell once too."

"Miss Bell? The sow?"

"Yea. After dinner one night I followed him out, cause he took the last biscuit with him. And he gave it to her." Dewayne says. "You believe that? Gave Miss Bell the last good biscuit."

Fucking sick. Miss Bell? Ron takes Dewayne to his room and puts him on his bed, telling him to get some sleep.

"But the sun is up."

"I know. We just need some sleep; we'll get up later."

"To feed the pigs?"

"Yea." Ron lifts Dewayne's blanket over him and tucks in the sides. He walks outside.

Ron stands on the porch with his eyes closed. The sun warms him as he listens to the morning birds. Through the burnt pines and ashes, Ron sees a truck slam to a stop at the front of his driveway. Two men jump out and run to the bed. They pick something up and toss it beside Ron's mailbox. The truck leaves blasting its horn and spinning tires.

He goes inside and lifts his mattress, grabbing Charles' old shotgun. He loads two

brass rounds and shoves a handful more in his pocket. Boots on, he kicks the front screen door open and walks down the steps. The embers are still smoking. Ash piles of chickens blow with the breeze.

Ron gets closer to the mass. Flies buzz louder. He sees the decapitated body of a pig. Guts laid out, wrapping the mailbox post. Pieces of flesh are ripped and torn. Something has been carved into the carcass.

“Pedophile,” Ron reads aloud. He kicks over the carcass and reads “Retard,” the other side. Out of the corner of his eye he sees the head lying in the ditch beside his mailbox. He walks over and kicks it. Barbie doll body parts fly out, spinning with the head. Ron bends over and picks up a severed, shaved head. It's covered in blood as are the hundred other pieces of the plastic. Body parts of twenty or more Barbie dolls had been cut at the arms, legs, and heads and then stuffed into the head.

Ron screams, “Think a dead pig scares me?” He drops the shotgun and picks up the pig, slinging it in the middle of the road. “He didn't touch your daughter! Leave us alone!” He walks back to the house, Dewayne still sleeping and he puts the shotgun under the couch.

“We don't kill it, if we don't eat it.” Ron remembers hunting with Charles. They would go hunting together before Diane died. It was the only time Ron did not have to look after Dewayne. It made him feel noticed by Charles. When Diane died though, Charles only focused on the bottle. A year into it and Ron was hiding Charles' memorabilia so he wouldn't pawn it for liquor money. Those days the farm survived on selling a few fresh eggs and hens each month.

Ron tries to remember the good times over the bad. He takes Dewayne hunting

now, though they have yet to kill anything. Dewayne just wants watch and screams, “run away,” each time Ron lifts the rifle.

That evening, Ron eats supper as Dewayne goes outside “To talk to Momma on the moon.” Before the screen door closes, Ron hears him screaming and running back inside.

“Someone's in the woods,” he cries, cowering under the kitchen table. Ron gets up, knocking the chair over behind him, and reaches under the couch. The shotgun isn't there.

“Dewayne, did you touch the gun?”

“No way,” he says. “It's too loud.”

Ron reaches back under the couch thinking he may have pushed it back against the wall. Nothing. A loud crack comes from outside followed by yelling. Another crack. Ron hears the pigs screeching. He looks out the window to see three shadows by the fence shooting towards the pigs. One kneels down as the other two run. An explosion erupts the fence into pieces and parts of the pigs sprinkle in the air. Ron runs outside as the men jump in a truck and leave. He is able to corral the pigs into the secondary field and finds pieces of his shotgun amongst bits of hooves and snouts.

Ron and Dewayne sit on the porch waiting for Brady. Amanda said he was on the other side of the county responding to another call.

“You know,” Dewayne says. “I didn't touch that girl.”

“I know.”

“I don't even like girls.” He looks at his bare feet. “I don't know if they like me.”

“Of course they do.” Ron puts his arm around Dewayne and hands him a glass of sweet tea. “We just got to find you the right girl. That’s all.” They sit together, Dewayne drinking tea, Ron drinking from a whiskey bottle. He hears something around the house.

“You hear that?” Ron says.

“Yea,” Dewayne hides his head in Ron’s shoulder.

“I’m going to see.”

“Don’t go.” Dewayne says. Ron looks down at his brother’s head buried in his chest. He wraps his other arm around him. He closes his eyes and kisses him on the back of Dewayne’s head.

He opens his eyes to see Lloyd and a brick, before he blacks out.

Ron hired Lloyd when he took over the farm three years ago. He was from a small town in Texas, or so he told Ron at the time. No driver’s license, got paid only in cash. But when Lloyd fled across Texas, his vices followed. The first month, Ron made him sleep in the barn with the new piglets and sows. He caught him a few times trying to pawn tools or farm equipment, but he needed the extra hand. He offered him cheaper rent in hopes to stop the theft.

Once, Ron found Lloyd drunk and naked in the chicken coop floor. He always made up excuses to look past the things Lloyd did.

*

Blood in his eyes, Ron looks around. Rope wraps his legs and wrists to a chair from his kitchen. Dewayne sits across from him, with a bloody rag in his mouth, and blood puddling around his feet. He sees Lloyd opening cabinets and throwing the contents at Ron and Dewayne. Glass cups shatter against their heads. The sun blinds him

through the window. He sees the pigs in the pasture. Some drinking by the pond, some feeding at the troughs.

“Where is it?” Lloyd says with a muddy accent. “I know you have it, where is it?” He walks to Ron. “Your brother is going to die. Tell me where you put it!”

“What,” Ron says. “What are you talking about?” Blood drools from his mouth.

"The fucking card!" Lloyd punches him; Ron spits out a tooth. "The Jackie card. Don't play stupid, nigger!"

“I sold that last year for feed.”

Lloyd grabs Dewayne by the back of his head and puts a kitchen knife to his throat. The blade presses against his skin and starts to draw blood.

"I'll cut his throat," Lloyd slides the knife across Dewayne's neck. “I saw it not ten days ago. Lie to me again.”

“Stop,” Ron says, struggling against the ropes, rocking the chair back and forth.

He tries to jump with it but falls on his side. Lloyd slides the knife more, cutting deeper and drawing more blood. "I'll fucking kill you!" Ron spits as he screams. Snot runs down his nose. He kicks his legs and breaks the chair. The back of it is still tied to him, Ron gets up and jumps on Lloyd, wrapping his legs around him as he bites a chunk of flesh from his neck, and spits it on the ground. Lloyd stabs the knife into Ron's knee and twists it. Blood shoots out Lloyd's neck, and he reaches to hold the wound.

Ron falls off his back, and frees one of his hands from the rope; grabbing the knife and pulling it out he leans forward and stabs Lloyd's foot to the floor. Blood pours down Dewayne's throat, bleeding through his white t-shirt. Ron drags himself to him and rips the shirt to wrap it around Dewayne's throat.

A puddle of blood forms around Lloyd's dead body. Pig food, Ron thinks.

Through Ron's tears, he says, "Hold on." He wipes the sweat and blood off Dewayne's face. "I'll get help just hold on, little brother. We'll get back up." He drags himself up and calls the Sheriff's office. Amanda answers. Lights flicker outside the windows, and the phone hangs up.

A truck rams through the front door crashing pictures and breaking windows. Two men get out.

"No, please." Ron begs. "My brother, please."

One man grabs Ron by the legs and the other grabs his arms. They lift him from the floor and start to walk him outside.

"No!" He struggles, trying to free his hands. His body sways in their hands. He sees the white t-shirt is now red on Dewayne's neck.

Outside, the men drop him on the ground and force him up on his knees. He looks to his left and sees his entire field burning. Pigs are running in panic as their skin crackles and the blood gargles their screams. The woods in front of his house are on fire. He looks up and sees he is kneeling in front of twenty men. Their shadows multiply in the light of the flames. Clyde steps forward.

"Please, Clyde. You've got this wrong. Dewayne never did anything," Ron motions towards the house. "The man you want is inside dead next to my dying brother."

"Your brother is a pedophile and deserves to die." Clyde spits on Ron. "You're going to die because you're trying to cover for him, but make no mistakes," he leans in to Ron, "no matter what lies you tell here tonight, you will still die."

"Clyde, don't do this." Ron says, blood pouring from his mouth onto the gravel.

“He never touched Lovie.”

Clyde forces his hand into Ron's mouth and grabs his tongue. He pulls a knife from his pocket and saws on it. The blood fills his mouth and chokes him as he tries to scream. Clyde drops the severed tongue at Ron's knees.

“I told you once already.” Clyde steps back and motions behind him. “Bring out the retard.”

Two more men go inside and drag Dewayne by his legs, leaving a trail of blood from the kitchen to Ron's side. Ron's head sways and blood pours from his mouth. He looks down and sees Dewayne holding the red shirt against his throat. Still alive, he thinks.

“Chain them to the porch and burn the fucking house down.” Clyde smiles at Ron.

The men get heavy metal chains and tie them to the porch rails. Ron can't reach Dewayne as the torches fly on the roof and crash through the windows. He stretches his leg, the blood still jumping from the knife wound, and extends his foot. Ron lies there, right leg stretched to touch Dewayne's. The men leave. It's only the two of them. His eyes start to close as the flames burn closer and police sirens howl between the pines.

Cyrus

Rosie held the infant, lifeless in her arms as the flames danced towards the horsemen who galloped away. Her light brown skin was covered in ash from the burning long leaf pine trees and oaks that crackled around. She was sixteen; the infant, her brother was dead. Her mother Grace was dead. The other women of the cotton farm were dead. The crippled man was dead.

One week before, her mother's husband, her step-father, William was brought home from the war by Franklin. When Franklin got to the home, he collapsed and dropped William; his body laid still on the ground until Grace lifted his head to hers and wiped away his bloodstained face with her tears. Her son, William Cyrus Gardner Jr., was born four months after he left for the war between the North and South.

They buried William the next day. Rosie took care of her infant brother, he was a year old, for the next few days, while Grace wept, alone. Franklin rested in a house tucked inside the woods, far from the main house and its eleven neighbors. Rosie would visit him when her brother slept.

“Did everyone die?” She asked him. Her voice had the same drawl as her mother's, but it had the same sadness too. Franklin shook his head, and looked down at his feet draped in the sheet of his bed.

“We missed home,” he sighed. “Thought about y'all every day.” His head still locked to his feet. “It'll end one day, and when it does,” he brought his head up and gave a half smile.

Rosie left. The next day Grace came and sat at the table. Her gaze looked distant. Dead before her last breath. Two horses stomped outside. Someone yelled. Rosie stood and ran outside. Two white men, one fat and the other tall who spat brown tobacco like swamp water, got off two black horses.

“Where's your master, nigger.” The fat one yelled and pointed at the house. The tall white man stepped in front of him, and slapped a woman who was holding her hands up to stop them.

“Don't see no men around here, Donnie.” He spat his tar. The crippled man, Clint, came around the corner of the house. He dragged a shovel along with his left foot, mangled by an abusive master before William bought him and gave him freedom.

“We would kindly ask you to leave,” he said. Rosie lifted William's musket, and stood on the porch. The weight of it made her sway before she straightened and took aim at Donnie.

“Sometimes,” she said. “We don't ask.”

The tall one stepped to the woman on the ground and put his foot on her throat.

“The way we hear it,” his foot twisted on her throat. “Ain't no man here, nothing left but women, and all nigger women at that,” he spat in the woman's face.

“He won't repeat it,” Rosie glanced at the tall man. Donnie flinched, and reached behind him for his rifle, slung on the horse. Rosie squeezed the trigger. It knocked her back against the door. Her head bounced off the wood and she slunk down. The blast from the musket echoed in her shoulder. It pulsed with each beat of her heart, like a galloping horse. She raised it, and reached for more powder. She looked up. The tall man rode away in the distance, behind the magnolias.

Clint dragged Donnie deep in the woods and left him. Rosie spat on him when they chose the spot. She kicked him down a ridge, and watched his body roll to the bottom.

When the men came, they came at night and with fire torches six feet tall. They pulled every woman from their house, their fingers dug in the dirt searching for traction and salvation from forty hooded men. Rosie heard their screams from Franklin's house. She, him and his family hid, her musket pointed at the closet door. She heard Grace. The screams of children and infants, one of them her brother, made her close her eyes and sob.

The silence is what let them know the men had left. Only the roar of fire and off in the distance, thunder. It took them four days to bury all the dead. Rosie placed a wooden cross at the head of each grave. At her family's she wrote "Their hearts will change" and "Baby Cyrus." She sang. Later, she would build on her parents' ideas. Franklin would help her rebuild the house and farm. Runaway slaves would find rest in their travels on the underground railroad. Her town, Cyrus.

Whiskey, Women, and Lucky Charms

Three years after coming home from Iraq, James Branch has lost his two-month sobriety and gained a divorce. He sits at his fold-out table smoking a cigarette and pouring Kahlua and whiskey in his Lucky Charms. His apartment is attached to a service department behind Cyrus Ford, he washes cars and keeps the lot clean. Rain echoes on the gray tin building. Branch's hand shakes as he attaches the Army issued prosthetic to the other, below his black wrist watch.

“So, this is thirty, Happy Birthday.” He says, looking around the room and biting his lower lip.

His beard covers most of the scars on his face, and the prosthetic almost looks natural. Branch closes his eyes. Smoke fills his nose, fire crackles, and he loses his breath in the heat. Sand pelts his neck, he tenses. Gasping, like catching a breath after holding his too long, he shatters the whiskey bottle against the wall. It bursts with the sound of the rain. Branch pushes from the table and grabs the broom; he kneels down. His dog tags clink. He throws the broom across the table and drops under it covering his head. The phone rings. His eyes shift left and right. Pulling himself from under the table he reaches for the phone.

“Sergeant Branch? It's Captain Miller.” Miller had been Branch's Commanding Officer.

“Sir, just Branch is fine.”

“Right. How is civilian life?”

“Thrilling,” Branch says, tossing his prosthetic hand in the air and sitting down.

“What can I help you with?”

"Good to hear. This isn't a social call. Last night they found Corporal Stevens. He shot himself."

Branch's watch rattles against the table. He forces it still with the other hand.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you. I know you two were the last of Alpha and I know how close you were. He had no family, so we're going to hold a memorial on base in three days. Can you make it?"

“In Germany?”

"Stevens stayed after getting out. I've got you on a drop seat out of Atlanta tomorrow morning if that works."

"I'll be there." Branch hangs up the phone.

He looks around the kitchen, a stack of dishes in the sink, three garbage bags piled on each other, and another broken whiskey bottle in the corner. A 9mm pistol waits in front of a picture of Rebecca and Branch in Paris before the divorce. Her red curls bounce as they walked down the cobblestone streets. Her smile is white even in comparison to her porcelain skin.

From the bathroom, Stevens screams "RPG," and Branch drops to the floor, the glass embeds in his prosthetic and draws blood from the other.

“Maybe Stevens is right,” he picks himself up. “I can't live like this.” Branch puts the bottle under his left arm and twists it open. Taking two white pills with his next taste of whiskey, he lights a cigarette, and looks at the pistol near the picture. He grips the pistol and places it in his prosthetic hand, rubbing his fingers down the barrel to his

watch. The hand is cold like the pistol. He puts it back in front of the picture.

Branch took Rebecca to her prom; they danced on the river boat for hours before screwing in his Bronco. She loved to dance. He smiles thinking about it. Before the war scars, they traveled to Paris, Rome, and any place they could get away. He was young and fun five years ago, but a nightmare follows each good memory. Gunpowder lingers in the faded blue apartment.

A few books sit on their backs on one shelf. *Beowulf*, *Huck Finn*, three Toni Morrison novels. He likes her style. He tells his lamp it's because she reminds him of the humanity Flannery O'Connor showed, her collection was better than them all. A few classes at Cyrus Northwest Community College, and he found his love of literature and whiskey. A year later the whiskey won.

Melanie, his sister says "Morning," as she knocks on the door and thuds the locked door against the frame. "Jay, you up?" She knocks again.

Branch opens it squinting.

"Is it Thursday already," he says, stepping aside.

"That it is little brother. Happy Birthday, I got you some," she stops, and looks at the kitchen. She sighs as she notices the pistol and finishes, "groceries. Everything good here?"

"Behind on housework." He takes a drag of a cigarette.

"Let me give you a hand." Melanie puts two brown paper grocery bags on the table and walks to the sink. "Mom and Dad say they love you and asked when you were coming to visit them, I told them soon. It's a nice place they're at now, but Dad doesn't have much longer. Cancer got rid of his hate." She nods. "Pick up that broom."

Branch sweeps the broken glass, "A few years too late for me," he takes a drag.
"How's he look?"

"He looks good, good days and bad days. Some mornings Mom says he still thinks he has to go to work." She laughs, "Then he asks her for the car keys. I swear it's just like when we were kids."

"Except for the beatings, huh?" Branch says.

"Brandon started his first day of fourth grade today. He turned ten last week."

Stevens screams from outside, "Branch do something!"

Branch drops the broom and breathes deeper, faster. His heart thuds, sweat builds on his forehead. Mud plasters the walls and sand spreads over the floorboards. The cigarette falls from his lips.

"Hey," Melanie says. She gently grabs Branch's hands. "You're home little brother, breathe with me."

The explosion knocks him to his knees.

"I'm here, just breathe." Melanie's pulls his face to hers, wet with tears. The haze of heat rises before his eye, like looking through a dirty window. He rolls his eyes, patrolling left and right. A hot wind stings his forehead as sand itches across his face. Melanie's voice cries around him, an echo.

Branch stands up, "I'm sorry." He stretches his eyes and concentrates on slowing his breath. "It's over now."

Melanie stands, reaching to hug him.

"You can come stay with us a few days; I know Brandon would love to have his uncle around. You're his hero, wants to be just like you." She laughs. "Even walks around

with a cooking pot on his head saying 'I'm Sergeant Branch.'"

Branch pushes her away, "No." He shakes his head. "You can't let him think that. I don't want—I went. I paid enough for us all."

"I know you did," Melanie steps forward. "He knows it isn't good, he wants to be a doctor to help soldiers. Jay, he just looks up to you." She wipes her tears. "He needs a father figure."

"I'll think about it after I get back from Germany."

"Germany?"

Branch grabs the broom. "Stevens died."

"Anything I can do?"

"No, I have to get ready after work."

"How about this, while you're working I'll clean up?"

He looks around and smiles, "Sure you up to it? I'm not exactly a master cleaner."

"Just get out of here you're already late for work."

Before leaving, Branch hugs Melanie. The steps down are weathered and rotten in spots. One foot-sized hole is at the top step, the scar of another drunk stumble. Morning light glows inside the car windows, aligned in a staggered way. A trail of metal and glass. Branch watches as dust lifts and falls like ash. In the back lot John, the boss' son, and a few other salesmen stand around smoking.

"You're late." John steps in front of Branch, sticking out his chest and putting his hands on his hips. "Why don't you head over to the balloon room and balloon up the lot. Think of it as punishment for being late."

"With the rain, they won't stay up."

“Maybe it'll stop.” John points to the gray door, the paint in flakes at the bottom and the wood swollen from rain.

The room is dark with no windows and a low ceiling. Staggered rows of cars lead to the rusty shack, Humvees stationed for patrol. His breath stutters in the heat and when he opens the door, his boots shift on the sand.

The walls are dry and brittle. Down a narrow hallway, to the left, he sees two small hands reach out. Slowly they move closer. First the arms, then a tiny chest with blinking lights, wires, and a small switch in the down position. A little girl's face creeps from the shadows. Tears flow down her cheeks creating clean trails of skin under the dirt and mud. Her bare feet are bleeding.

"Do something Branch," Stevens says with his rifle pointed at the girl. Branch lifts his rifle.

"I... I don't know what to do." His barrel shakes and his breath stutters.

"What the hell do you mean? Shoot her!" Stevens turns the safety off. Tears form in Stevens' eyes looking back at Branch.

The girl's hand stutters across her chest.

"I can't," Branch says.

"If you don't she will!" The girl's finger touches the switch. Stevens fires his rifle.

Branch turns and sees the gray walls of the balloon room. Stacks of plastic signs that spell out “Used Cars” or “Sale” lean against one of the walls. He rubs his eyes and then his hand, from the tip of the middle finger to his watch. Branch stares, motionless, at the signs. Thunder echoes outside dropping Branch to the cold concrete floor. His hand clinks, holding himself up.

Stevens yells, "Incoming fire!"

Branch rolls over, pressing himself against a wall. Ricochets burst sand and mud from the shack. He crawls to the open window. Four men kneel behind a white truck. Two fire AK-47s, one has a small caliber pistol and the fourth is lowering the muzzle of an RPG to aim. Branch jumps back, knocking the tanks of helium over with a loud crash and "Fuck."

He fills balloons tying a red string to each one and letting them float against the ceiling. They bounce when they reach the top. A condom rainbow rubbing together as they mix. The nurse's heels squeak on the tile floor of the clinic, and the paper mattress cover crinkles as Rebecca sits down. Six months after they lost the baby, Rebecca left with three suitcases and a half-empty cardboard box. The helium tanks hiss like the oxygen mask.

"There's no life after war." Branch lights a cigarette. "Shitty memories of when you thought you were tough." He takes a drag and the rain stops. He laughs thinking of his foolish ideals of why he joined. Before the war, he remembers being in high school and watching the news broadcast on September eleventh. The feeling of hopelessness and fear filled him like a cup and overflowed into rage that fueled the idea of having to do something.

Branch funnels the balloons out the door. One catches the corner and pops. He drops behind a car, breaking the side mirror. Crawling to the front of the car, he inches his head out from the tire. He sees John pointing at the balloons, now floating away. Branch gets up to his knees and places his back against the car. He brushes off the gravel and grass. The salesmen crowd around John laughing.

"I smoked crack for a week last night." John says, slapping a fat salesman on his shoulder. "Branch, come here real quick."

"Hey man, I just—"

John interrupts him waving his hand in Branch's face.

"Your customer came in while you were doing balloons. I told her to come back tomorrow. What's the lot boy doing trying to sell a car?" The other salesmen laugh with John. The fat one's belly lifts under his tight buttoned shirt.

"I've been waiting on her for three weeks," Branch shakes his head. "She was here to buy my truck."

"Shit, I don't know what all you were doing alone in there. I got more problems than you. Pops is opening another dealership and wants me to run it. Getting rough."

Branch screams, "What the fuck are you talking about!" He pictures bursting John's white skull against the pavement. Like a pink mist left from a .50 cal round. He steps closer to John, tightening his fists, he smells John's brown sugar shampoo. He pushes John back, and the fat salesman steps forward with another shorter one. John puts his arm in front of him and tells Branch to take the day off. He says he'll take the week.

Branch walks across the street to the liquor store. Behind him, the salesmen laugh. He stares at his reflection, obscured by Wild Turkey and Jägermeister. The sign glows "open." The metal handle flashes in the sun, a rifle magazine in the desert. He rubs the scars under his beard. The prosthetic fingers are cold on his skin. It's a stranger's hand. Lifeless and dull. A part of him that isn't him.

He thinks he would have been a good father, even with the war scars. He would take his son to the park to slide and swing. Maybe fly a kite or throw a football. Hell, he

could have liked soccer, like the Iraqi kids who always tried to sell their sisters for one night. Branch wouldn't care.

Once, Branch took Brandon to the park. Melanie thought it would be helpful for them both to spend time together since Rebecca had left only a few days before. Branch sat on the bench, watching as Brandon climbed up the slide and came down. A mother with her daughter smiled at him. He politely smiled back and looked at the ground closest to him. A truck's horn startled him and they left soon after.

"Brandon is a good kid." Branch opens the door. He walks down the aisle without needing to look. "Wonder if he likes football or kites." He gets three bottles. With the Army disability and compensation check every month he doesn't have to work at Cyrus Ford, but he likes having time set aside to keep him busy. Walking to the counter his pills tap in his pocket. After paying for the whiskey, he stands at the counter opening his bottle of pills and takes three. He walks outside to smoke. The flicker of the lighter explodes like a bomb off in the distance.

He takes a drag. A young girl and her mother pass. The girl turns to look back. Her eye is black and empty from a bullet hole. Fresh trails from tears mix with blood and dirt. Branch squints, pressing out a tear. Her black hair matted with blood. Her knees buckle, and she falls sideways, landing on her hips and hitting her head. Stevens runs towards the girl, dropping his rifle.

Stevens weeps.

"I'm so sorry." He cradles her head in his lap. "Why were you... Who. Why—"

"We had to," Branch says, resting his hand on Stevens back.

"But you didn't." Stevens' hands tremble as he fixes the girls hair and lays it softly

on her shoulder. "I, I did." He gently takes off the vest strapped to her. "I'm so sorry." He straightens her torn T-shirt. Stevens lays her head down on the sand. Branch smells gunpowder.

Branch turns the corner of the liquor store and falls to his knees. His heart is pounding, sweat stings his eyes and he breathes faster. He tries to stabilize himself with his shaking hands, but his arms are too heavy to lift, and he breathes faster, and the sand scrapes his face and the black smoke rises in front of him, he breathes faster, and his heart beats harder and Stevens screams and he breathes faster and gunshots echo like a tin roof in rain and faster and the sun glares his eyes and faster, he closes them. Branch lies on the ground. Smelling the smoke, he feels the grains of sand against the back of his neck. He uses a dumpster to steady himself. Gunshots wisp by his ears. He beats sand from his uniform.

"Everyone else is pinned down in that building," Stevens points to a mud shack.

"I've counted about ten of them. What do we do?" Branch sees two exploded Humvees with body parts scattered and blackened. A crackling corpse hangs out of the driver's window, embers burning under the skin. Ramos.

"Cover, we need to get cover." Branch leads Stevens through an adjacent shack. He opens the door to a narrow, dark hallway. Stevens posts up behind him, and they move into the room. A dusty red couch it is torn and missing one leg. Someone has it against the window.

"Can we get clear shots from here?" Stevens moves the couch.

"Maybe they still have some magazines and can help out a little. I'm running low myself."

"Me too."

"We know what to do." Branch turns, and two small hands reach out from down the hallway.

Gravel digs into Branch's hand. He shakes his head, back and forth. Down the alley Stevens kneels beside her.

"I'll kill them all." Stevens looks up from the girl's body and runs to the window. He lays on his rifle's trigger yelling. The men turn and start firing at the two of them. Branch goes to the other side of the window. They both barrel rounds down range. Branch watches his rounds drop one, two, and then a severed arm flies in the air followed by screams and pink mist.

"RPG!" Stevens yells just as it hits the wall. Chunks of dried mud, sand, and glass cover Branch.

*

Branch walks up the steps to his apartment, overstepping the hole. He opens the door and reads a note on the table.

Jay,

I got everything cleaned up for you. The clothes in the dryer are clean, and the dishes in the washer are done. I went ahead and made you dinner, and it's meatloaf. Put it in the oven for 350 for about fifteen minutes or until it's warm. There is more sauce in your fridge and fresh tea. I had to get Brandon from school, but if you need me just call. Let me know if you are going to stay over, Brandon and I will get the extra bedroom straight tonight, so you have a place to sleep instead of the couch. I love you little brother, and stay safe.

Love,

Melanie

Branch places the note in front of Rebecca's picture. Melanie took the pistol. He

smiles. He reaches under the couch and grabs a double barrel shotgun and a box of shells. After dinner, three more pills, and a full bottle later, he falls asleep on the couch.

Some dreams are of happier memories. Rebecca and him dancing in the dark the first time the electricity went out because he forgot to pay. She laughed and said it was all right, that heroes shouldn't worry about bills, but laughs turned to silence, then screaming and fights. Branch tried to explain that the daily battle of living was harder than daily fighting to live. A few bottles later she kicked him out. Most nights he slept under the stairs and watched the stars through the hole. When it rained, he slept in his truck, but this time she packed her things and walked over him, lying under the stairs, watching her put the bags in the trunk to leave. He sat up. She kept driving.

He danced with a nurse once. After his injury, while he was waiting in Germany to be sent back state-side, a nurse came in his room. Branch was rubbing his hand. She gently grabbed it, lifted him to his feet and started to hum as she swayed. She held his hand high and moved the other to her waist, still humming and smiling looking into his eyes.

A creak in the floorboards wakes him.

Branch shoulders the shotgun, and puts his back against the wall. Down the hallway, only darkness. He steps into it. He stands still, waiting for his eyes to adjust. With the barrel he pushes the door to his bedroom.

"Looks clear," Branch says, moving into the room. Something moves under the closet. He chambers a shell. The click thunders through the house. Branch opens the closet door and pushes his barrel between the clothes. Nothing.

He checks under the bed and out the windows. Nothing.

"You should get geared up," Stevens says down the hallway.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing, they found some smoke for us to check out before we leave." Stevens closes the Playmate tarp that has been duct taped and separates their beds. Branch stands up and gets his uniform on. He looks at the picture of Rebecca he has plastered to the tarp like one of the playmates. He runs his hand across her face, down her shoulders and kisses her cleavage held firm by a tight black dress. He sits on his cot to dust the sand off his feet and put on his boots. Grabbing his pack Stevens yells for him to hurry up.

"Who are we suppose to head out with?"

"They got us lined up with Charlie. Two of their guys went down yesterday. Probably just some tires burning. Should be in and out."

"Any word back on our guys?"

"Last anyone saw them was the day we got hit. Come on man; we have to go. We do this and tomorrow morning we are on a plane back home." Stevens adjusts his vest.

The sand dusts up from the Humvee in front of them. The other two soldiers are quiet. They cross hills of sand, closer to the black smoke. The ride is quiet.

"Looks like some animals and melted tires," the other driver says on the radio.

"Roger, just burning some more dogs." They slow passing the pile of smoking carcasses.

"We need to check it out." Stevens jumps out, and Branch follows. The Humvee driver stops and yells something out the window.

"What are we doing?" Branch asks.

"I don't know. Just got a feeling." Stevens eases closer to the smoldering pile.

"There are some teeth. Something metal too." He reaches his rifle barrel out and moves the small metal piece.

"What is it?"

"It's a dog tag."

"Name?"

Stevens bends down and picks up the tag. He tosses it between his hands until it cools down. Spitting on it, he rubs the metal reading the name.

"Denton."

"Damn," Branch drops his head and lets his rifle sling to his side. Denton's Dad always sent the best porn. "There's another tag, but I can't get it." Branch reaches in and pulls the other tag. The explosion knocks him down and sends a sharp ringing in his ears. He wipes sand from his eyes. He struggles to lift himself and look around. Stevens is laying motionless as the debris of the carcasses and sand rain on him. The hand Branch pulled the dog tag with now is a jagged stump with two fingers. The explosion ripped off one of his ears and left the shrapnel of the dog tags sticking out of his face, burning. Stevens is choking on his blood, like a drowning man.

"Medic!" Branch drags himself over to him. Blood puddles from an open leg wound. He takes off his belt and ties it around Stevens' thigh. He can't find anything to make the tourniquet. He breaks down his rifle and puts the barrel under the belt and turns it tight. The other squads help him lift Stevens into the Humvee. He sits beside Stevens trying to take off his gear. Branch rolls Stevens over as the blood falls from his mouth. They rush him back to base and into the medic's bay. The medic tries to sit Branch down.

"I'm fine just help him," Branch says, his voice breaking from tears.

"We're going to help you both. Sergeant, you're missing an ear, and it looks like your shoulder is injured." She motions at the hospital bed. "You need to sit down. I have to wrap your hand."

The medics lay Branch down and put an oxygen mask on him.

"Kitchen," Branch snaps back focusing on the walls of his house. The framed pictures of him and Rebecca litter glass on the floors. Nothing in the kitchen or living room. He checks the bathroom. Nothing again. Branch takes a drink from the bottle and lies down falling asleep reading Flannery O'Connor.

The next morning, Branch wakes up to the smell of bacon. Melanie has let herself in.

She pours him coffee. "Sorry I couldn't be here last night for your birthday. Someone wanted to go to the park." Brandon sits at the table.

Kicking his legs, Brandon says, "We flew a kite after it stopped raining."

Branch gets up and straightens his shirt, "Sounds like fun, Bud."

"What time is your flight?" Melanie says putting down a plate of eggs, bacon, and fried potatoes for everyone.

"Ten."

"I packed you a few things. Your class A's are ironed, hanging in the closet."

After breakfast, he loads his truck. Melanie and Brandon give him a hug, and they leave as the rows of cars and pavement fill with sand and mud shacks. The heat takes Branch's breath, and Stevens yells for him to do something.

WORKS CITED

- Boyle, T.C. *Doubletakes: Pairs of Contemporary Short Stories*. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004.
- , editor. *The Best American Short Stories 2015*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. Vintage Books Edition, 1991.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*. Edited by Larry W. Phillips, Scribner, 1984.
- Johnson, Denis. *Jesus' Son*. Harper Collins, 1992.
- Kardos, Michael. *The Art and Craft of Fiction: A Writer's Guide*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*. Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.
- Madden, David. *Revising Fiction: A Handbook for Writers*. Barnes and Noble, 2002.
- Morris, Wright. *About Fiction: Reverent Reflections on the Nature of Fiction with Irreverent Observations on Writers, Readers & Other Abuses*. Harper & Row, 1975.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mufflin, 1990.
- Saunders, George. *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline: Stories and a Novella*. Riverhead Books, 1997.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughter-House Five*. Monarch Press, 1974.
- Welty, Eudora, and Richard Bausch. *On Writing*. Modern Library, 2002.